

Private Members' Business

would cover far more people, in fact all those who willingly observe the so-called omerta, the law of silence, which is unacceptable in this context, and they will realize that as soon as Bill C-277 is passed. They ought to know that now, and in fact they do. There is an element of wishful blindness on the part of members of the medical profession who agree to engage in the genital mutilation of female persons because they say that if it is done by lay people there would be a risk of infection.

This does not make sense. It is like people who say that at least if we do the excision or infibulation, it is under anaesthetic. There is something very wrong with that type of reasoning. Whether it hurts or not is not the point. The point is whether we are prepared to tolerate such a brutal, I would even say bestial act.

The hon. member for Québec said earlier that 6,000 young girls or young women undergo this horrifying operation every day. I saw it on television once. It was very painful to watch, and it turned my stomach to see a girl of ten or not even that, tied up with a piece of wood in her mouth to keep her from screaming or to stifle her screams. It was awful. These images were horrible. And I think no Canadian who would see this violation of the integrity of the human body could remain unmoved.

I have no problem supporting the bill sponsored by the hon. member for Québec, for the reasons I just mentioned. We must put an end to this because, by tolerating or claiming to tolerate genital mutilation, we are merely giving further credit to a status that for a long time was and in some respects still is the lot of women in Canada and in the western world, to be a second class person.

Remember that female suffrage in Canada only came after the First World War. The first woman to sit in this House, Agnes Macphail, was elected in 1921. For a long time, members of the female sex were considered mere subordinates. It has not always been easy. It is still not easy in this country to take one's womanhood and assert it right to the top.

The reason you are in the chair today is not because you were given the position, but because you and your parents and your grandparents fought to put you there. What a vibrant symbol to have a woman in the chair. We could set an example in various ways, but the point should be made in another respect that, in terms of the status of women, major changes are still required in areas where this still applies.

• (1855)

Equal treatment for women, obviously not only equal under the law—we already have this pretty well everywhere now—, but equal in fact. Equal in fact means having people understand, from the earliest age, that men and women are born, live and die equally—not only in law but in fact. When we accept these principles, we will then be able to advance the status of women in Canada.

One comment on the proposal by my colleague for Québec: the punishment for the offence she proposes to make of the mutilation of genital organs is, in my opinion, not nearly severe enough.

Since a charge of assault causing bodily harm can result in a maximum term of 14 years' imprisonment, I will suggest in committee, because I am sure the House will refer this bill to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs, that the maximum sentence be at least 14 years as well.

The maximum sentence must be the sentence given the worst criminal in the worst situation. In the case of a repeat offence or multiple offences, the five year sentence seems inadequate. This can easily be done in committee. On the principle of the matter, I will support Bill C-277 when the vote is taken.

[English]

Mrs. Anna Terrana (Vancouver East, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to lend by support to the private members' bill of my colleague for Quebec. The issue is extremely important and deserves the attention of all of us in the House.

During the recent hearings by the standing committee on citizenship and immigration we discussed and heard evidence on gender based immigration. Canada was the first country to recognize gender based persecution, and women who fear genital mutilation have been granted refugee status. Experts say over 100 million women have been subjected to genital mutilation—what horror.

[Translation]

In Montreal, the Human Rights Commission is threatening legal action against anyone performing such an abomination on young girls. The mutilation is practised on young girls for religious and cultural reasons.

We know how difficult it is to change traditions and customs, but we can at least forbid such violent acts in Canada, thus protecting naive young girls who do not have access to other cultures and traditions. The amendment to the Criminal Code will ensure that such a practice is neither accepted nor justified in our society.

The procedure is carried out by a woman who does not even need to have the necessary expertise or instruments to operate on the young girls.

Even though we cannot intervene in other countries, we must make sure that such tragedies do not occur in Canada where multiculturalism protects us, but does not condone practices which are contrary to human rights or criminal in nature.

[English]

Multiculturalists can help with educating Canadians on this and other issues. Nowadays new surgical techniques are being developed to undo the damage so that women who were subjected to infibulation can have children without having to suffer excruciating pain and can have almost the same type of life as